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Middle-Class Environmental Subjecthoods
Around Waste in Chennai, India

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Abstract

Over 5,000 tons of waste are generated per day in Chennai—an Indian state capital of over four million residents—which are disposed of in two open refuse dumps. In reaction to the sobering degree of waste generation and (mis)management, pockets of activism are emerging in Chennai with the middle classes playing a significant role. While much scholarship on Indian middle classes has focused on middle-class activism via organizations and associations that invariably disenfranchise the poor (Baviskar 2003, Harris 2011), this paper explores individual environmental subject formation around waste among middle classes, and the implications on class and caste dynamics. This paper draws on an ethnographic study conducted in Chennai from May to August 2013. The study focuses on middle-class residents in two neighborhoods, Mylapore and Mayor Ramanathan Chettiar (MRC) Nagar, and is a part of a larger project on the materialities of waste in Chennai.

Introduction

The heat was boring down on the dusty roads of Chennai, an Indian state capital of over four million residents. Ram, an informal waste worker, and I took solace from the relentless sun after having spent the morning collecting recyclables from overflowing dumpsters and curbside “unofficial” dumps. His tricycle cargo rickshaw was stacked neatly with tired burlap sacks bulging with recyclables, which in their previous lives were milk sachets, fizzy soda cans, clinking bottles of spirits. A flea-ridden goat rummaged through plastic bags of wilting food that lay around the dumpster. The noisome stench of refuse wafted toward us. But this dumpster, for all its grittiness and grime, is a source of income for Ram and a visible, politicized point of contestation for the residents of the surrounding gated communities.

It is through such frames of reference, informed by interactions with informal waste workers who are working to reclaim and re-value waste on a daily basis, that I approached the central aim of this study: to understand environmental sensibilities in regards to waste among Chennai middle classes. The middle classes are being slated as responsible for the increased generation of waste, given increased consumption and the correlated industrial patterns of production, but they are also politically active and influential in social and environmental initiatives. Thus, the study asks, how does environmental thought and action around waste manifest among Chennai middle classes? In what

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ways are politics of class and caste embodied within discursive practices around waste among middle classes?

This paper draws on a three-month ethnography conducted in Chennai from May to August 2013, consisting of semi-structured and informal interviews of residents in Mylapore and MRC Nagar, two middle-class neighborhoods. In addition to the middle classes interviewed, the study also draws on interviews of politicians, activists, and informal waste workers, as well as the author’s attendance and participation in public forums around waste, informal waste working, and private meetings between local activists and their stakeholders.

This paper is neither a comprehensive analysis of waste environmentalism in Chennai, nor a prescription for resolving the city’s perennial crises around waste. Rather, it is an ethnographic invitation to understand the discursive capacities of environmental subject formation around waste among middle classes in Chennai with a focus on recycling and composting practices.

**Waste and the Indian Middle Classes**

Over 5,000 tons of waste are generated per day in Chennai, distributed between two open refuse dumps in low-income, wetland areas. Given the physical constraints of these dumps to sustain the sheer quantity of garbage, as well as the ongoing political tensions surfacing around low-income residents’ health suffering due to the dumps, there is a robust discussion underway on a municipal level on finding technoscientific solutions (e.g., waste-to-energy plants). There are also, through the media and local NGOs, budding efforts to encourage sounder waste management practices (e.g., home composting, engaging informal waste workers) among residents.

The middle classes are of focus here because they are highly influential, not only in a consumer sense, but also culturally and politically. Numerous scholars have acknowledged the difficulty in defining the Indian middle class, not least because of its multitudinous and diverse nature (Fernandes 2006; Nisbett 2007). While consumer analyses of Indian middle class tend to focus on its notable contribution to economic growth (cf. Albett et al. 2007), they elide cultural and political implications of the class. Thus, ethnography is essential to understand the political, economic and social processes that underwrite middle class actions, notably in relation to, but not exclusive to, environmentalism.

One methodological parameter employed in this study was to select informants based on their residence in gated communities, which are representative of a form of residence popular among the Chennai middle classes (an observation based on conversations with real estate developers for a prominent real estate firm, Ceebros). Additionally, as established in other cities of the global south (Caldeira 2000; Low 2001), gates are important physiospatial boundaries that map onto the social hierarchical boundaries; they dictate who comes in and goes out, who (and what) stays in and stays out; what is acceptable outside and what is deemed unruly inside.

**Middle Class Environmentalisms**

Amita Baviskar (2003) has famously articulated how Indian middle-class bourgeois environmentalism, in the form of intraclass alliances with the state, invariably disenfranchises the urban poor that tend to occupy public spheres in the name of creating clean and green public spaces. While this may hold true in Chennai, the present study attempts
to understand more on an individual level the process of subject formation toward an environmental sensibility and the implications on class and caste relations. To this end, it is helpful to consider Arun Agrawal’s (2005) study on how Kumaoni Indians’ participation in governmental regulatory schemes influences environmental sensibilities; he argues that actions—as opposed to solely values and beliefs—are what drive environmental sensibilities into consciousness. Applying Michel Foucault’s (1991[1978]) concept of *governmentality*—where the government exerts influence upon behaviors of the population not through coercion and violence but through systems of power that encourage subjects to govern themselves—to the environment, Agrawal introduces *environmentality* to unpack how “technologies of self and power are involved in the creation of new subjects concerned about the environment” (Agrawal 2005: 166). Below I consider Agrawal’s notion of environmental subject self-formation in relation to middle class action and inaction around waste, through the examples of recycling and household composting.

**Recycling**

While there is no institutionalized recycling in Chennai, the informal recycling economy is robust, which includes the thousands who rummage through street bins and dumps as well as those who run “waste paper marts,” where recyclables are monetarily compensated according to weight. The study found the level of participation among middle classes in recycling to be minimal. Most indicated that the compensation is too low—about Rupees 5 (US$0.10) per kilo—or because the act of recycling took too much effort to segregate at the source.

But for those who do practice recycling, it tends to be through the disciplining of their domestic laborers, who are instructed to keep plastics and papers segregated at source and then given the recyclables to sell for their own benefit. Middle class environmental subjecthood is then contingent upon the actions of their domestic laborer, which they presume to be driven by economic motives as well as a sense of obligation to them. The middle classes tend to see this as a favor they do for their domestic laborers: “She [the maid] gets to earn a few extra rupees; so, we help her out like that,” said one Mylapore resident. Waste for the middle classes is a form of currency and a means of disciplining the domestic laborers, to not only ensure that they effectively render waste invisible from within the private quarters but also that they engage in practices not directly stated in their professional agreement, such as selling the household recyclables.

Bharat, an elderly man in a Mylapore gated community, explained to me that he and his wife “help her [their maid] here and there, giving her leftover food, so we expect she’ll throw the garbage away properly, sell these things for money.” The expectation that the domestic laborer be compliant is thus both about a sense that they are obligated to the employer in nonfinancial ways, but also that they must invariably be drawn to any source of additional income as menial as it may be. However, I discovered through conversations with domestic laborers in these households that they traded in the recyclables for money—but only if significant enough in value. Light-weight items they just dispose of in the trash. Thus, there is a fundamental disconnect between the middle-class expectation of the domestic laborer’s engagement in recycling and what is actually happening, because of an assumption that those of lower class are a) indiscriminately motivated by their impoverished state and b) that they feel a sense of obligation to the
middle classes as their employers. Regardless, the middle classes are attempting to articulate a sense of environmental subjecthood that relies on the actions of their domestic laborer, bringing to bear the extension of interclass relations into environmental praxis.

**Household Composting**

Insofar as the middle classes are articulating environmental behavior around recycling by “conducting conduct” of their domestic laborers, the middle classes are also disciplining themselves—through household composting. As Gay Hawkins observes, “Waste captures the attention not simply of those in desperate need but also those able to imagine different uses” (2006:74). This creative zeal to transform the wasted into something productive is evident among the middle classes in Chennai, seen in the gravitation toward developing home composting initiatives (c.f. Anantharaman 2014). In contrast to recycling through domestic laborers, composting offers middle classes the opportunity to be in control of the waste, and to participate in the process of its revaluation. However, even in the process of disciplining themselves into being environmental subjects, the middle classes are also disciplining those around them in more direct contact with waste (e.g., domestic laborers, gardeners, gatekeepers).

Priya, a housewife and trained engineer, started composting in her MRC Nagar gated community a few years ago. In response to her mother’s complaints regarding Priya working closely with waste, she employed the community’s gardener to haul the organic matter and turn the compost. “But it was also because of the waste itself,” Priya explained. “Waste is for the maids, not the homemakers.” The physical stuff of waste thus is a reification of a class and caste divide—certain people are designated in society to deal with waste—but is also one that is being challenged by the emergence of household composting among middle classes.

Priya, like other middle class residents in both Mylapore and MRC Nagar who have started composting, has disciplined herself into an environmental subject around organic waste. Also implicated in the process of composting is disciplining those who already work closely with waste, similar to the practice of recycling via domestic laborers. In Priya’s case, the maid—who keeps the compostables separate—and her gardener—who transports and turns the compost—are, significantly, a part of the process that requires the most physical contact with the stuff of waste. Thus, even within middle-class environmental sensibilities toward self-initiated composting is present a concatenation of power relations that reproduce and challenge the politics of deeply-entrenched caste and class divisions.

**Conclusion**

To explore emergent forms of environmentalism among middle classes, this paper has studied two modalities of knowledge and praxis around waste among middle classes with a focus on the private, household sphere: recycling and self-initiated composting. The paper has shown that middle-class narratives around recycling indicate deeper-seated interests in educating their domestic laborers to be environmental subjects on their behalf. With household composting initiatives, there is a gravitation toward closer contact with waste but still appears to be an asymptotic relationship because of a continued deferral to the caste system which implicitly sanctions that those of lower caste are somehow responsible for the management of waste. This paper has provided a snapshot of
the environmental practices around waste in the middle class, and is part of a larger project on materialities of waste in Chennai. Further empirical and ethnographic research is necessary to elucidate both underlying cultural and political processes shaping the phenomena observed here, but also to cast light upon other emergent forms of environmental praxis around waste among Chennai middle classes.

**Endnotes**

1. Informal waste workers, also known as “scavengers” or “ragpickers,” refer to individuals who reclaim recyclable materials from dumpsters, as in this case, or at refuse dumps, as well as those individuals that run or work at “waste paper marts,” establishments at which individuals can exchange recyclables for money, by weight.

2. Waste is defined in this study using Vinay Gidwani and Rajyashree Reddy’s (2011) framework: “[Waste] is a mobile description of that which has been cast out or judged superfluous in a particular space-time. It is a technical and political artifact that gathers force in its performativity” (2011: 1649). Waste is a social being, following Arjun Appadurai’s (1988) concept of how goods, things, “stuff,” are vessels by which states, individuals, and NGOs articulate identity, negotiate power, and influence the cultural production of urban space. As Joshua Reno (2009) has articulated, this study approaches trash as an artifact with deeply-imbricated political, economic, and cultural processes that influence notions of personhood and social relations.

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